

DEVELOPING THE STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM.

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Abstract:

The following paper is an attempt to examine the way the foreign language culture is introduced in the language classroom and how it apprehended by students. The aim is to sensitize teachers of the importance of developing the student' intercultural competence. We have started by a theoretical aspect and conducted a field work where we have tried to shed light on the way culture is taught in the department of English University of Batna. We have realized that a lot of work needs to be done by teachers, not only to provide students with cultural information, but also to develop their intercultural competence. Teachers and students do not view culture and its importance the same way. The main conclusion we reached is that, given the crucial role of culture, its appropriate teaching imposes itself in order to help students identify similarities and points of difference between their own culture and the foreign language culture in order to understand the other and maintain the positive from both cultures.

ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى محاولة دراسة كيفية تدريس الثقافة في قسم اللغات الأجنبية و كيف يتعامل معها الطلبة.

الهدف هو تحسيس الأساتذة بأهمية تطوير الكفاءة الثقافية لدى الطلبة . بدأنا بحثنا بالجانب النظري ثم قمنا بعمل ميداني حيث حاولنا إلقاء الضوء على الطريقة التي تدرس بها الثقافة في قسم اللغة الانجليزية بجامعة باتنة

استخلصنا من بحثنا أن الكثير من العمل ينتظر الأساتذة ليس فقط بإعطاء الطلبة معلومات عن الثقافة الأجنبية ولكن أيضا تطوير كفاءاتهم الثقافية. الأساتذة و الطلبة ليس لديهم نفس المفهوم للثقافة و أهميتها

و الخلاصة التي توصلنا إليها هي و بالنظر إلى أهمية الثقافة فان تدريسها بالطريقة اللائقة يفرض نفسه علينا لمساعدة الطلبة لمعرفة نقاط التشابه والاختلاف بين ثقافتهم والثقافة الأصلية و ذلك لفهم الآخر و الإبقاء على النقاط الايجابية في كلتا الثقافتين

Introduction

In recent years, the teaching of culture in the foreign language classroom has taken a prominent place among researchers and teachers. Teachers seem to be more conscious about the importance of providing their students with cultural information about the foreign language they are learning. It is now becoming taken for granted that mastering a foreign language can, by no means, be limited to the mastery of the phonological and linguistic aspects of that language. In fact, communication with speakers of a foreign language is usually faced with cultural differences because language is part of culture and its use is dependent on cultural values. Being aware of these values is a prerequisite for any language learner to avoid communication problems. Hence, our conviction is that teaching the foreign culture should be a priority in all language classrooms.

I- What is culture?

A dictionary definition of culture suggests that it is the total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge, which constitute shared bases of social action. According to Brown(1994:170) culture is a deeply ingrained part of the very fiber of our being; but language, the means of communication among members of a culture is the most visible and available expression of that culture. So a person's view of the world, self-identity, and system of thinking, acting, feeling and communicating can be disrupted by a change from one culture to another. For Hinker (2001:17) it is not an exaggeration to say that there are nearly as many definitions of culture as there fields of inquiry into human societies, groups, behaviours and activities.

Duranti (1997:24) defines culture as :“Something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and of course through linguistic communication”.

Moran (2001:25) believes that culture has five dimensions:

1-Products: which represent artefacts produced by the members of the culture. They may be tangible :tools,buildings and written documents or intangible: oral language or music.

- 2-Practices : they include language and other forms of communication. They can be verbal, or non-verbal. They also involve notions of time, space and appropriateness.
- 3- Perspectives: which represent beliefs, values, and attitudes
- 4- Communities: include social context in which practices occur. They range from broad (for example; national culture, language, gender and class) to narrow contexts (for example, local political parties, sports clubs, and family).
- 5-People: who are the individual members who embody the culture in unique ways

II-The Relationship Between Language and Culture

Language and culture are very closely related. Byram (1985) states that, when people learn a new language, they also learn its culture, and when they learn to use the language; they are learning to make conversations with other people from another cultural situation. Brown (1987)says that language is the most visible expression of a particular culture. Therefore it is almost impossible to transmit culture from place to place and from generation to another without language which is the principal carrier of values and meaning. On the other hand, language would be impossible to understand without making reference to the cultural context which has produced it. Consequently, we cannot think of teaching a foreign language cut from the teaching of its culture.

In their explanation of the way in which culture and communication are closely related, Samovar, Porte, and Javil (1981) claim that culture and communication are inseparable, not only because communication is who talks to whom about what and how, but also how encoding and decoding of the message is done. Culture for them is the foundation of communication.

III-The Importance of Culture in Language Teaching

It has been argued that mastering a foreign language does not mean having a linguistic competence in that language (Krasner 1999). A language learner needs to master the culture of the foreign language too. For example how to agree or disagree with someone, how to

express apology, how to make requests, etc...because the intonation patterns and linguistic behaviours that are acceptable in their own language may not be appropriate in the target language. Usually in our classrooms, the cultural aspects of the target language are taught implicitly, but they could be made explicit to raise the learners' awareness of their importance. However, when teaching a foreign culture, teachers should make sure not to provide any value judgment so that learners focus will not be shifted from the culture of the taught language itself to a judgmental position where the student accepts what fits his own culture and refuses what does not. Byram (2000) states the importance of making students aware about the foreign language culture in order to develop their critical thinking and intercultural competence. He says:

In short, someone with some degree of intercultural competence is someone who is able to see relationships between different cultures- both internal and external to a society- and is able to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or other people. It is also someone who has a critical or analytical understanding of (part of) their own or other cultures- someone who is conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their understanding and perspective is natural.

Byram(2000:9)

In this sense, foreign language learners should be made curious about discovering the other culture beard by the speakers of the foreign language. Discussing food or clothing habits could be a chance for students to know more about the foreign language and its culture. For example giving a tip to a waiter in an American cafe or restaurant is very common and even set as a right for the waiter, while in the Algerian context tips are very rarely given.

IV Goals of Teaching Culture

When talking about teaching culture in the foreign language classroom, the first question we have to ask ourselves is what are the objectives and goals of teaching culture?

The answer seems to be evident, we need students to understand and communicate interculturally at ease. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993:7,8) identified the following goals when teaching culture:

- 1-To develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviours
- 2-to develop an understanding that social variables age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the way in which people speak and behave.
- 3- To become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture.
- 4- To increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
- 5-To develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalisations about the target culture in terms of supporting evidence.
- 6-To develop the necessary skills to locate and organise information about the target culture.
- 7- To stimulate pupils curiosity about the target culture and to encourage empathy towards its people.

V Approaches and Methods to Teach Culture

There exists many approaches as teaching culture is concerned one of them is the mono-cultural approach which has the disadvantage of ignoring the learner's own culture. This fact made it grow less popular giving the floor to the Comparative Approach drawing on the learners own knowledge, beliefs and values which form a basis for successful communication with members of the other culture (Byram 1991). In this approach the foreign language learner is encouraged to make comparison between his own culture and the foreign language culture as it was clearly stated by Byram and Planet (2000)

So the comparative approach does involve evaluation but not in terms of comparison with something which is better, but in terms of improving what is all too familiar. Comparison makes the strange, the other familiar, and makes the familiar, the self strange and therefore easier to reconsider.

(Byram and planet 2000:189)

Kramsch(1993) suggest many methods to teach culture these include:

- 1- Establishing a 'sphere of interculturality' which means that teaching culture is not transferring information between cultures, but a foreign culture should be put in relation with ones' own. The intercultural approach includes a reflection on both cultures.
- 2- Teaching culture as an interpersonal process, which means replacing the teaching of facts and behaviours by the teaching of a process that helps to understand others.
- 3- Teaching culture as difference, which means considering the multi-culturality and multi-ethnicity of modern societies and by looking at various factors like age, gender, regional origin, ethnic background, and social class. In other words cultures should not be seen as monolithic.
- 4- Crossing disciplinary boundaries, which means linking the teaching of culture to other disciplines like anthropology, sociology and semiology.

VI Techniques for Teaching Culture

After we dealt with the main approaches to teach culture, this part is devoted to talk about some techniques teachers use to teach culture in the language classroom.

VI-1 Literature:

It is considered as a useful medium for teaching culture. Kramsch (1993) claims that the main argument for using literary texts is that literature has the power to represent the particular voice of the writer among the many voices of his or her community and so it appeals to the particular in the reader. Fenner (2001:16-20) says that literary texts are richer and more diverse than factual texts. Due to this,

they offer learners the opportunity to explore multiplicity of language and culture

VI-2 Newspapers and Magazines:

Hughes (1992) says that teachers can find good cultural insights from newspaper headlines, advertisements, editorials, sports pages, and weather reports. They have the power of presenting students with authentic language.

VI-3 Songs:

They are usually used to teach vocabulary and grammar, but they can also be a good means to teach culture. They require more involvement from the part of students to discuss lyrics.

VI-4 Movies:

Movies are highly recommended to teach culture because they help the teacher to teach the foreign language and culture at the same time. They are usually very attractive to students because of the way they ensure connection of students to language and culture at the same time.

VII Field Work

VII-1 Method:

The main aim of this part is to examine the status of culture in the foreign language classroom in Algerian Universities and more particularly at the department of English, University of Batna. Two questionnaires' were designed, one for teachers and the other for students .A common part of both questions was done on purpose to see whether students and teachers views about culture and its teaching converge or not. In addition to the questionnaires, we used classroom observation in order to observe how teachers do explicitly or implicitly teach culture in the classroom to emphasise the strengths and try to remedy to the weaknesses.

VII-2 Sample:

We have selected a sample of 360 students of the entire population of the department of English (that is 13/)and 11 teachers, among the 81 teachers. 4 teachers are full-time teaches and 7 part-time teachers because the majority of teachers in the department of English are part time teacher. So for the students we have taken 120 1st year, 120 2nd year and 120 3rd . year students.

VII-3 The Questionnaires:

The teacher's questionnaire included questions about culture and its teaching. The questions were mainly around these four axes:

- 1-What's culture for you?
- 2-Is teaching culture important? Why or why not?
- 3-What method do you use in teaching culture?
- 4-What are the teaching materials you resort to?

As for the student's questionnaire we asked mainly the following questions:

- 1-What is culture for you?
- 2-Do you think that learning about the foreign language culture is important? Why or why not?
- 3-What aspects of culture you believe are interesting?
- 4-Do you have your own sources of language about culture? What are they?

VII-4 Results:

Teachers' answers to the question related to the definition of culture ranked between people's way of life, their history and traditions and customs. Some say that culture is the art and literature, plays, movies and songs produced in this the limits of one country or shared between few countries. Some added that language is a major component of a nation's culture because it is closely linked to our way of thinking.

As for the importance of teaching culture, most of the teachers recognize the necessity to teach the foreign culture in order to succeed in teaching and increase the students' motivation to learn the foreign language.

Concerning the 3rd set of questions related to the methods teachers use in teaching culture, most of our respondents claim that they proceed through a comparison between the students' culture and the foreign culture to show common points and differences. As for the teaching techniques and materials used to teach culture teachers say they use literary excerpts, poetry, songs and movies to teach culture. They say they use these techniques to develop the students' intercultural communication competence.

Students' answers to the definition of culture were not very distinct from those provided by teachers. Although we remarked a

certain superficial views of culture, most of them relate culture to music, folklore and movies, songs ignoring the history, traditions and customs of the people. As to the question whether teaching culture was important or not, most of them responded positively and they even stressed it should remain a separate course as it is already in the first year because the culture of the language disappears from their curriculum in the 2nd and 3rd years.

Culture is taught implicitly through other courses and sometimes only pinpointed by teachers as a filler when the course is over. When asked about the aspects of culture they believe more important in the language classroom, most of them opted for songs with lyrics well explained and movies followed by classroom discussion to achieve a better understanding of the themes.

And here we can feel a significant difference between teachers' views as to the aspects of culture to be taught and the way this was to be carried out and those of students.

VII-5 Discussion of the Results:

Although the questionnaires have shown that both teachers and students are conscious about the importance of teaching culture in the English language classroom, they seem not to agree on what constituents of culture. Despite of the fact that teachers recognize the importance of culture, not all of them are teaching it effectively and explicitly in their courses. Time constraint and overcrowded groups are usually a barrier toward this end.

It can be concluded, that teachers give more priority to language acquisition by developing the four linguistic skills at the expense of the cultural dimension is proved through the teachers' practices. Moreover, teachers and students do not always convey on the definition of the culture its importance and the techniques to use to teach it.

Conclusion:

There seems to be enough evidence to argue for the fact that culture is very important in the foreign language classroom because language and culture cannot be treated separately (Kramsch 1993, Byram 1989, Chastain et al 1988).

Developing the students' intercultural communicative competence should be the objective of all language teachers to put

down all barriers that could result from the students' ignorance of the target culture. As to the procedures and techniques to carry out the teaching of culture in the language classroom, they depend on every single teacher and his own students. Their aptitudes and motivation should be the only criteria on which the teacher's choices of materials and teaching techniques should be based. In this respect making resort to I.C.T (information and communication technology) seems very likely to offer a chance to students from sharing opinions and reflecting on their own learning strategies and techniques.

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